J. D. Salinger loathed the limelight. "Sooner or later," the author of "The Catcher in the Rye" predicted, "I'll bog down, perhaps disappear entirely, in my own methods, locutions and mannerisms."

In Cornish, N.H., Salinger found a cabin in the woods, far from the media, the masses and the phoniness of American society. He died there in 2010, 45 years after the publication of his last short story.

Salinger is gone -- but not forgotten. And in "J.D. Salinger: A Life," Kenneth Slawenski, the creator of the website Dead Caulfields, offers "a salute" to the reclusive writer and the fiction in which he is "so embedded."

The product of an exhaustive search for primary sources, which, unfortunately, remain in short supply, the biography provides fascinating details about Salinger's life.

Slawenski describes Salinger's childhood in upper middle-class Manhattan; a stint at Valley Forge Military Academy (which he drew on for Holden Caulfield's prep school); tours of duty at NYU, Ursinus College and Columbia University; and a romance with a very young Oona O'Neill (later Mrs. Charlie Chaplin). Salinger's World War II experiences (in a unit that suffered the highest rate of casualties of any American regiment stationed in Europe), Slawenski indicates, led him to ask fundamental questions about life, death and human connection. And to seek answers in Zen Buddhism, Vedantism and mystical Catholicism.

Slawenski is less successful in illuminating Salinger's fiction. The aim of fiction, he suggests, simplistically, "is the re-creation of realism" (he may mean "reality"). But Salinger, who, according to Slawenski, viewed himself after "Catcher" as "God's author," was seeking to incorporate spiritual epiphanies into his stories "that were, in essence, intangible." Although every Salinger "silence, every sideward glance, bears meaning," Slawenski insists that "it is meaning that needs little analysis."

Therefore, Slawenski, who summarizes the plot of every story but displays little affinity for literary interpretation, feels justified in declaring ex cathedra that Seymour Glass, who blows his brains out at the end of "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," is "Salinger's affirmation" of humanity's triumph over despair. And in dismissing -- without addressing -- the "frequent misinterpretations by critics."

"Somehow," Slawenski concludes, the passage of time may reveal that Salinger "fulfilled his duties" as an author and a prophet. Perhaps. In our judgment, however, Salinger lacked the certainty of a prophet. He is best understood as a
seeker, obsessed with preserving the innocence of children, who struggled, often unsuccessfully, in his life and in his 
work, to reconcile faith in the healing power of Eastern religion and oneness with God in this world with a 
soul-wrenching knowledge of human stupidity, cupidity and cruelty.

-- Glenn C. Altschuler and Patrick M. Burns

**J.D. SALINGER: A LIFE**

Kenneth Slawenski

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